Social Policy
ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE • SUMMER 2024 • VOLUME 54 • NUMBER 2

MORAL SPIRITUALITY AND THE RESCUE OF DEMOCRACY[1]

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher & Magidah Khulda Bat Sarah

Should moral spirituality play a role in saving democracy?

Some may argue we're better off without it (moral spirituality, that is).

Were he here, Alexis de Tocqueville would not agree. "It is religious faith" he said, that accounts for the best of American exceptionalism and has prevented us from doing the worst some of us scheme to do.[2] He found that in America (circa 1831-32), "The safeguard of morality is religion, and morality is the best security of law and the surest pledge of freedom."[3]

We would argue that democracy does not *survive* in the absence of broadly recognized moral values—social morality.[4] For it is our common values that make possible our shared sense of commonweal. They constitute the moral-spiritual infrastructure, which is the backbone of American democracy.[5] Such values point the way to achieving, with others, lifelong goals, while also laying out the boundaries of acceptable behavior, which include the limits on our reactions when disappointed, insulted, or victimized.

As Gian Vittorio Caprara put it, "Democracy is destined to fail unless the moral agency of citizens operates as a moderator of the new iniquities carried by modernity"[6] What's more, our recent history confirms a connection between increasing disaffiliation from faith communities, jettisoning of religious faith and practice, and "… the erosion of the traditional norms that have sustained our democracy."[7]

What is the status of American moral spirituality?

Given that disaffiliation, we are forced to ask: Is America's moral spirituality even up to the task?

Can it save American democracy (and us)?

It's true that a significant percentage of Americans no longer believe in or practice the faith of the earlier generations of their families.[8] And yet, those same Americans still carry a residual of those traditions in their basic values and principles.[9] Most are still disgusted by injustice and lack of compassion for suffering. And most are still inspired by examples of risking one's life or livelihood to confront cruelty and speak truth to the powerful.

Moreover, a survey of the world's seven great religions and a number of secular organizations, including the American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, and the United Nations, reveals the existence of widely shared moral values in the U.S., most notably truth, justice, and compassion.[10] The followers of the Abrahamitic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—commonly identify with and have expectations of others in regard to those values.

Additionally, individuals of faith (and even those with none) share convictions in the application of shared moral values to civil society. Our theological and philosophical views of "truth" and "justice" may vary, but the belief that public officials have a moral duty to be truthful and to treat all people with equal justice, for example, is widely shared.[11]

Doubters and skeptics of religion may disclaim any consciousness or relevance of the religious origins of the values they identify with. But a closer examination often reveals that they derive directly or indirectly from early religious founders, prophets, and teachers.

In fact, at this point it's virtually impossible (even for those who espouse atheism, agnosticism, and scientism) to escape the effects of those values, because they have been adopted as a part of the American culture[12] and have blended into the cultural beliefs of families and educational institutions who transmit them from generation to generation. They have become part of the moral spiritual infrastructure.

How can we agree with those who don't agree with us?

What's more, the potential to recognize commonweal with those who otherwise express conflicting interests and ideologies has been demonstrated repeatedly over several decades of professional base-building community organizing in neighborhoods, faith communities, and workplaces. Our own faith-based community organizing revealed extensive cultural crossover on issues with moral implications.[13]

In the course of initial community organizing drives, congregation and parish members were often surprised to learn, when relating one-to-one and in small groups, that the disparate cultural, ethnic, and racial

groups within their congregations, which historically had been isolated from one another, had much more in common than they ever imagined. In one Catholic church, Anglos, Latinos, and Vietnamese were separated in their church's internal organizations. But when they reflected together on their beliefs about the social action prompted by their experience of living in the city, they discovered that they had the same concerns about schools, drugs, and gangs in the larger community, the same beliefs about parental responsibility and the obligations of public officials, and the same desire to work responsibly for needed reforms. They had the same hopes and dreams for themselves and their children.

When the members of that church came together in a campaign with members of non-Christian religious communities, they also found that they had much more in common than they had previously imagined, despite their different cultures and faith traditions. They were soon working together enthusiastically in a faith-based campaign. Throughout the first meeting of the campaign's 50-plus-member steering committee, an aura of wonder and celebration prevailed. Previously distanced people of diverse faiths and cultures were working together for improvements in the larger community that were meaningful to all of them.

The same phenomenon occurred in the locality-based organizing we have done, where members of different cultural, ethnic, and racial and religious groups (including those who participated more religiously and those who participated less) from low-income, working-class, and middle-class neighborhoods came together to tackle problems they had in common.

Virtually everyone discovered, many to their surprise and delight, that their moral beliefs about right and wrong were widely shared. It's apparent at the grassroots that cultural and religious boundaries are far less rigid than media sensationalism suggests and far less embattled than divisive politicians and power brokers might want the public to believe.

Murder, torture, enslavement, and other forms of physical, social, political, and economic oppression are believed to be morally evil everywhere, including where they are de rigueur officially. But even less exceptional immoral behavior, such as stealing, violating promises, betraying trust, lying, abusing verbally, talebearing, and gossiping are also widely condemned across religious, ethnic, cultural, and racial boundaries.

Is America in transition? And if so, to what?

We conclude that Americans, despite our ethnic, cultural, racial, social, national and ideological differences, nonetheless share more than enough in our common moral spiritual values (a) to discuss and decide on what we regard as our commonweal, and (b) to agree that the commonweal must be the primary purpose of the institutions of governance we are willing to support and submit to.

And there is good reason for that discussion and agreement to take place now.

The need to remake American democracy is clearer now than ever because the nation is recognizable as an anocracy, neither a democracy nor an autocracy "… but something in between," something transitional, moving toward autocracy, in which "Citizens receive some elements of democratic rule ... but they also live under leaders with extensive authoritarian powers and few checks and balances."[14] In other words: the United States is facing existential threats to its survival as a viable democratic-republic.

Those threats create societal tensions, which in turn can drive a social movement to begin rebuilding the nation's democratic institutions from the bottom up. As John Adams wrote: "Every problem is an opportunity in disguise."[15]

The opportunity now exists (a) for the *demos* (the "common people") to remake American democracy; (b) in time, to overcome the corruption of the nation's top-down institutions, which have been enabled by historic economic inequality that has given rise to super-wealthy and powerful corporations and individuals; and (c), before the end of the century, to dethrone the oligarchs who have perverted political power by their private, covert commandeering of nearly complete control of the public powers of local, state, and national governments.

When the American commonweal is to be sustained by elected representatives who claim to act in our name but who have alienated themselves from us with their moral corruption—we are confronted regularly with their lies, their false patriotism, their thievery, their self-dealing, their misuse of power, and their blatant lawlessness—many of us, alienated, turn away from the corrupted and begin to look directly to one another to realize our commonweal, even if it is only to be found in our neighborhoods, places of worship, service organizations, and informal associations.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), recognized as the "father" of Modern Orthodoxy, known for his teaching regarding a Torah-based life that addresses social problems,[16] explains this phenomenon of alienation in his commentary on the Tower of Babel.[17] He could have been describing what we see happening now in America:

> When the united power of the community is misused and, instead of using it on the treasure which is entrusted to it, the individuals, for what it is there for, viz. לקרא בשם הי [to proclaim in the name of God (that which uplifts humankind)], it wants to use it only in the service of its own name נעשׂה לנו שם [we will make a name for ourselves], then the individuals arise and say: "I acknowledge no community, I acknowledge myself, and myself only." True he is rejecting the good with the bad, cutting himself off from the root which should hand down to him all the human wisdom from its divine source, and is throwing himself into the arms of a vague pathless subjective life, but such decentralisation is then the only means of saving humaneness in [hu]man[kind].[18]

Because increasing numbers of the people are turning away from belief in and reliance on corrupted

representative democracy, the potential exists for a largely *disorganized social movement* of the demos to become an *organized political movement*; building momentum towards increasingly empowered covenantal[19] (self-initiated and directed), "open" (directly democratic) grassroots assemblies to exercise their Constitutional sovereignty; insisting on a rightful share of the public powers to counter the authoritarian powers and restore the checks and balances mentioned above.

We, the people, have a sovereign right to reaffirm our values and to reclaim the moral soul of the nation, by repossessing a share of our *public powers* through the formation of directly democratic assemblies in which every citizen is enfranchised to approve or disapprove the exercise of those powers, not by influence *on* but participation *in* our institutions of governance.

As C. Douglas Lummis, a distinguished political theorist, has described the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the people:

> If we are going to give power to the philosophers, the Prince, the elected, or to the party central committee, we have to explain why. In the case of restoring power to the people, no such argument is required. An explanation may be required of why such a situation will be safe, efficient, lasting, or a source of wise decisions, but not why it is legitimate. Radical democracy is legitimacy itself.[20]

[1] Many of the themes and points in this article have been considered at length in a series of our articles published in *Social Policy*, including: "Remaking American Democracy I: Kick-Starting the Public Powers and Power-Leverage of Popular Assemblies 2.1" (2022) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/REMAKING_DEMOCRACY_I_2.1.pdf]; "Remaking American Democracy II: A Groundplan for the Demos to Gain Public Powers" (2022) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/REMAKING_DEMOCRACY_II.pdf]; "Community Organizing Response to the Fascist Oligarchy of the Billionaire Brotherhood" (2021) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/ORGANIZERS_TREASURE.pdf]; "Moral-Spiritual Infrastructure: Touchstone of Movement-Building Community Organizing" (2020) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/MSI_CO.pdf]; "Winning the War for Grassroots Empowerment: Benefits of Building a Public Powers Movement" (2017) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/WINNING_THE_WAR.pdf]; "Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform" (2016) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/METRO_GOVT.pdf];"Public Powers for the Commonweal: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing" (2015) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/PUBLIC_POWERS.pdf].

[2] In the current crisis of American democracy, the structure of checks and balances to limit the powers of the president were largely circumvented by Trump. Given the corruption of the Republican party, Congressional powers were neutered; the Attorney General became Trump's co-conspirator; and although the courts were never truly compromised by Trump, his appeals and delaying tactics enabled his end-runs around their slow, deliberate process. Arguably, what has made the difference in resisting Trump's authoritarian ambition has been the moral virtue of individuals—military officials, civil servants, and prosecutors—who have stood up in demonstrations of "civic virtue." See, for example, Tim Wu, "What Really Saved the Republic From Trump?" *New York Times* (December 10, 2020).

[3] Alexis De Tocqueville (1805-1859), *Democracy in America* (Kindle edition), loc. 1420.

[4] "Social morality" refers to the moral values, principles, and behavioral norms that govern social relations. It reflects a collective understanding of right and wrong, guiding interpersonal relationships, communal responsibilities, and the functioning of societal institutions. It pertains not to an individual's conscience and ethical choices, widely shared standards that enable cooperative living and mutual respect among diverse individuals and groups, providing a framework for addressing social issues such as inequality, rights, and the common good. See Moshe ben Asher, "Moral-Spiritual Infrastructure: Touchstone of Movement-Building Community Organizing," *Social Policy* (Winter 2020) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/MSI_CO.pdf].

[5] Commonweal describes our common wellbeing, our general good, our welfare and prosperity as a community. It relies on our moral-spiritual infrastructure as a nation, which itself is grounded in our religiously derived shared fundamental values. By the seventeenth century "commonweal" defined the political system in which the supreme power of government is legitimized by the consent of the citizenry.

[6] Caprara, "Democracy as a Moral Challenge," in (Ashley Weinberg, ed.) *Psychology of Democracy Of the People By the People For the People* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 307-331. See also: William Norris Clarke, "Ethical Erosion of American Society?" World Affairs (October-December 1997) [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/wa/wa_97clarke.html]; "Democracy on the Front Lines," Special Address by Timothy Snyder, Salzburg Global Seminar (June 30, 2023) [https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/democracy-on-the-front-lines-timothy-snyders-reflections-on-freedom-ukraine-and-the-challenges-ahead]; Gabriel Ehri, "The Advantage of History: An Interview with Timothy Snyder," Friends Journal (October 1, 2017) [https://www.friendsjournal.org/timothy-snyder]; and Georg Lind, "Moral Competence and Education in a Democratic Society," in (Jerhard Zecha and Paul Weingartner, eds.) *Conscience: An Interdisciplinary View, Salzburg Colloquium on ethics in the sciences and humanities, Series A: Philosophical and Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publications, 1987), pp. 91-122.

[7] See Richard Just, "How Religion Can Help Put Our Democracy Back Together," *Washington Post Magazine* (October 28, 2020) [https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/10/28/religion-politics-rebuild-american-democracy/?arc404=true].

[8] However, nearly half identify as "religious." See Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., 47% Identify as Religious," Gallup (September 22, 2023) [https://news.gallup.com/poll/511133/identify-religious-spiritual.aspx].

[9] The research reported in Philip Schwadel and Sam Hardy, "Faith still shapes morals and values even after people are 'done' with religion," The Conversation (June 16, 2021) [https://theconversation.com/faith-still-shapes-morals-and-values-even-after-people-are-done-with-religion-160328] confirms that "... the religion residue effect is real. The morals and values of religious dones [*sic*] are more similar to religious Americans than they are to the morals and values of other nonreligious Americans." Peer-reviewed research confirms that traditional values persist. See Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values," *American Sociological Review*, 65(1):19-51 (February 2000). Although the values persist in cognitive form, they may seem to have disappeared because they often remain unexpressed in action without prospective positive reinforcement, such as the anticipated benefits that accompany participation in organized social action. See Moshe ben Asher (né Michael Silver), "Social Learning Theory and Community Organizing," Gather the People (1978, 2021) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/SOCIAL_LEARNING_CO.pdf], p. 17.

[10] See Richard T. Kinnier et al., "A Short List of Universal Moral Values," *Counseling and Values*, 45(1):4-16 (October 2000).

[11] Regarding **truth**, see: Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Truth and Lies in the Jewish Tradition," My Jewish Learning (n.d.) [https://myjewishlearning.com/article/truth-and-lies-in-the-jewish-tradition]; John Caldwell, "What Is Truth?" *Christian Standard* (March 1, 2021); Quran Explorer, "Speaking Truth In Islam," Education in the Light of Sunnah and Qura'an (February 1, 2021); regarding **justice**, see: Rabbi Toba Spitzer, "Tzedek: The Jewish Value of Justice," My Jewish Learning (n.d.); Smith Hopkins, "Justice and the Christian," Olive Creek Church of Christ (January 20, 2018); Yasien Mohamed, "More Than Just Law: The Idea of Justice in the Qur'an," Yaqeen Institute (February 7, 2020); and regarding **compassion**, see: Rabbi Maurice Lamm, "Day to Day Judaism: Kindness," aish (n.d.); Stephen Witmer, "Kindness Changes Everything," desiring God (September 4, 2016); and Muhammed Habib, "What does Islam teach about kindness?" medium.com (December 6, 2019).

[12] See Moshe ben Asher, "Moral-Spiritual Infrastructure: Touchstone of Movement-Building Community Organizing," *Social Policy*, 50(4):55-64 (2020).

[13] See Moshe ben Asher, "Faith Into Action—Community Organizing in Orange County, California," *Organizing* (Fall/Winter 1992) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/OC_CONG_ORG.pdf]; and Moshe ben Asher, "Key Learnings in Congregational Community Organizing Workshops," Gather the People (2001) [https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Downloads/WS_KEY_LEARNINGS.pdf].

[14] See Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them* (New York: Viking Press, Crown, 2022—Kindle edition), loc. 284. See also, Sarah Repucci, "From Crisis to Reform, A Call to Strengthen America's Battered Democracy," Freedom House Special Report (March 2021) [https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2021/crisis-reform-call-strengthen-americas-battered-democracy].

[15] The quotation is often attributed to John Adams, but there is no verifiable source directly linking him to the quote.

[16] The basic concept, *Torah im derekh eretz* (תורה עם דרך ארץ—Torah with the way of the land), is mentioned in Mishna 2:2 in relation to one's worldly occupation, and was later defined by Rabbi Judah Lowe (1525-1609) to include scientific understanding. Hirsch, in his commentary on Pirke Avot 2:2 (פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת—Chapters of the Fathers), explicitly extended the concept of the "way of the land" to include scientific knowledge of "… the social order that prevails on earth…."

[17] Bereshit 11:1-9

[18] Hirsch commentary on Bereshit 11:7

[19] See Daniel J. Elazar (1934-1999), "The Covenantal Origins of the American Experiment," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (online publication, n.d.) [published as "The Covenant Tradition in Politics, Volume Three," *Covenant and Constitutionalism: The Great Frontier and the Matrix of Federal Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 1996—Kindle edition, 2018)]. Elazar, a political scientist known for his studies of the political culture of the United States, describes the history in which the first emigrants from England "entered into a covenant of self-government," an extraordinary innovation in the development of democracy. From their reading of the first book of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah), they saw themselves as new Israelites. With the compact they made on the Mayflower while still at sea, they jettisoned the historical "divine right of kings," covenanting together instead, "witnessed" by and subject only to the will of God, with themselves sovereign over their political affairs. Each person voluntarily agreed to the rights and obligations, the benefits and burdens, which would be shared by all. Elazar walks the reader through the subsequent history of the adoption of the characteristics of the covenant, the *brit* described in the Torah, which became the *participatory democratic foundation* of the later New England towns, the American colonies, and the newly formed United States *federal* (i.e., covenantal in essence) government.

[20] See Lummis (b. 1936), *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.28.

© 2024-2026 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda Bat Sarah